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Race and the Politics of Agency in Porn: A Conversation with Black BBW Performer Betty Blac

Mireille Miller-Young

Porn performer Betty Blac straddles both the mainstream adult industry and the feminist-queer independent side of U.S. porn production.[1] As an African American Big Beautiful Woman (BBW) performer who also identifies as queer, Blac has pursued opportunities to work in both the heterosexual, BBW market—which typically fetishizes the bodies of voluptuous women—as well as in the market for porn made by and for queers. Nominated for the first Adult Video News Award for BBW Performer of the Year in 2013, Blac's performances for queer productions like Courtney Trouble's *Lesbian Curves* series and Shine Louise Houston's *Crashpad* series have garnered the University of Sydney educated actress increasing attention. Blac, an avid writer and videoblogger with a large fan following, also works in the digital side of the adult entertainment business as a webcam performer for *Kink.com*—one of the few black women or BBWs to do so. Extremely thoughtful about the politics of race, body size, and women's agency in the adult industry, Blac offers important insight into why a critical lens for racial, sexual, and feminist issues matters to those studying the role of pornography in society and the nature of the business itself. For Blac, being an African American woman in porn means negotiating sex work organized along hierarchies of race, where black women are often at the bottom. While BBW exists as a specialty genre of porn, often the companies producing films for black and interracial BBW markets are exploitative. In the conversation that follows, Blac discusses the ways that she contends with this tricky terrain and how she seeks out greater economic value, autonomy, respect, and pleasure, often in queer pornography where issues of identity and embodiment tend to be more fluid. Finally, Blac describes her vision of a kind of porn she would like to produce, one based on the sexiness of diversity and imagination rather than the routine and often uncreative logic of what sells.

Mireille Miller-Young: What are some of the ways in which race plays out in the adult industry?

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Betty Blac: There's one director who shall remain nameless. He offered my white friend three scenes but he only offered me one blowjob scene [because] he didn't really feel like black Big Beautiful Women (BBW) were as marketable. He was only willing to work with me because I was light skinned. I sent him an e-mail and said basically, "You're a racist."

MMY: His logic seems counterintuitive because so much of BBW features black women or women of color. BBW seems to be one space where more women of color are able to get entry because we can have bigger bodies, or at least more of us can kind of fit into that genre. Do you think white BBWs are more marketable than women of color BBWs?

BB: No, I don't think that white BBWs are more marketable. As I told the director, "You guys are the generators of the porn. You are creating the marketing." I feel like there are more companies that bother to market white women more [than women of color] but that doesn't mean that [white women] are [more] marketable.

I have [white] friends who have worked for the same companies as me. I may have shot more for those companies but their photo shoots will be the ones that are in the ads, the ones that are in *Adult Video News*. They're the girls who get the covers. That's not necessarily the case with a lot of women of color in the industry.

If you go to the "plumper" Web sites and take a look at the women who are in the ads and on the splash page, it's not that there aren't women of color. But companies tend to promote white women more. Especially with Web sites like *Score.com*, where they have the "Girl Next Door" look that they're going for. Models are fighting to even be included and they're just so happy to get shoots that they don't even care that they're not going [to appear] on the main pages.

MMY: It's the same story in mainstream, non-BBW-oriented porn. For the more prestigious shoots and feature opportunities, black women and women of color tend to be shut out.

BB: That's definitely true. I mean BBW is already a subculture and then being a woman of color and a BBW—that's a subculture of a subculture. It also depends on who you're willing to work for. I personally don't want to work for really ghetto companies. I don't want to work for companies where I'm going be referred to as a "nasty ho" or any of that stuff. I want to work for the main respectable companies or for the local indie companies.

It is interesting that the only video cover I ever made was for one of the kind-of ghetto companies. That was probably the least amount of money I have made for a shoot. I didn't realize until after the fact that they are a

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company who will regularly find women who are down on their luck, and especially young, pregnant black women who are beautiful, and offer them $1,000 to do four shoots.

MMY: So those women are only getting paid $250 per shoot?

BB: Yeah, there's a lot of that. There's a lot of pregnancy porn. There's a lot of exploitation in the industry. It depends on what company you work for. A lot of these companies (and the company I was working for) [shoot] multiple kinds of porn. The shoot I was in was all-black BBW. That company mostly produces porn with black women in a variety of settings.

MMY: What were the things that offended you about the working conditions? How were you treated?

BB: I was new to the industry and I didn't really know how much you're supposed to make and things like that. A friend set up the shoot and she was honest about saying it was going to be a little bit less money. If I had the wisdom that I have now, I probably wouldn't have done it. I did it because I wanted to appear on a video cover. That was the deal. But what ended up happening was that the cover [photo] made me look really light and I don't think it was a flattering picture of me. It's not something that's made my career any better. I don't feel ashamed about it or anything, but when I look back, I really didn't need to do it. I only made six hundred bucks for two scenes. [The scenes] were super awkward and, you know, they're two scenes that no one probably even sees.

MMY: And you got paid $600 for two scenes?

BB: A lot of what I've made has been ridiculous, which is why I'm at this point now where I've made this decision recently that I'm not going to do any more condom-less work. This means that I'll be mostly shooting stuff for myself or for local or Indie companies. It means that I won't be working for a lot of the major companies. I feel so proud about that [decision] because most of the shoots that I was on were not [paying me] that much money at all. It was partly to do with me being black and BBW, and partly to do with porn. Porn just does not pay that much money anymore, especially with shooting in Los Angeles. I would have to pay to travel to get to L.A., I would have to pay for a place to stay, I would have to pay for all of the things that I needed to maintain myself—waxing, nails, whatever. I have to pay $200 for testing. And by the time that I've done all that I better have at least three or four shoots lined up even to cover my expenses, let alone be able to come home with anything.

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MMY: I'm interested in the resources that it takes to be in the game, especially for black women. In addition to the waxing and the nails we have hair, which costs a lot to do. How much money would you say that it takes you to actually do all the self-care necessary to even work?

BB: It takes a lot. [In terms of how much it costs] I guess it depends. When I've shot for Los Angeles companies, they don't pay for you to get out there, but when I've shot in Miami, the companies fly you out, they provide room and board, and they have someone who does make-up.

MMY: Black women earn half to three quarters of what white women make. The difference in earnings involves a lot of overt and covert racism. Performers tell me about the micro-aggressions they experience, how they feel treated poorly in general and made to seem undesirable compared to white women. Do you think that racialized exploitation impacts you? How does that make you feel?

BB: It is really isolating. When I had that disagreement with that director [who I mentioned earlier], an amazing friend of mine also had a shoot with him the next day and she called him to the carpet about his racism. She was offered $1,700 for the same work that I was offered $1,500. At first, when I tried to point out to her the racism in the industry she kind of didn't say much. When the director said that he was only willing to work with me because I was large, she started to see that the industry was racist, but she still stayed friends with him.

So that kind of thing is what hurts me and makes me infuriated. I feel isolated because there are so many people who don't know how industry racism works, and I sense them judging me when I speak out about it. They say I'm complaining or that things are all in my head or that I'm just not trying hard enough.

I've had really great experiences [working in porn], but the amount of racism and the amount of frustration that I have around this, has gotten to the point where I'm not having fun anymore.

At times I find myself comparing myself to other women in porn. I was really bringing my self-esteem down before I realized that it was the racism. These other women have so many scenes and all the banners and I would think, "Is this person better than me?" I don't like to be in that headspace. I don't like to compare myself to other women or bring the other women down to make myself feel better.

MMY: That's understandable. The industry has created a system of racial hierarchy where your only option is to compare yourself to other women. Women are pitted against each other in this effort to get in a better position.

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The black women I have interviewed are frustrated and feel that white women use their skin privilege all the time, especially those that charge more money for performing a scene with black men. Black porn performer Marie Luv went to her director and demanded an interracial rate like the white women and they just kind of laughed her out of the room.

BB: It's interesting that interracials are, for the most part, seen as black man, white woman. None of the other mixed-race porn is really seen as interracial. Someone pointed out to me the other day that there are these sites called "reverse interracial" with black women and a white man. So, okay, a white man and an Asian woman, or a Latina woman and an East Indian man are not interracial? I was totally appalled.

MMY: I'm curious about how the racial issue overlaps with the BBW issue, in that you kind of are put in this double category. Do you feel confined in that category?

BB: I feel confined. Maybe if I had more resources and I put myself out there in a different way, I might be able to cross over and be featured in films other than specifically BBW or specifically black. But I just don't have the time and the resources now. I don't like to be labeled in my regular life, so being in this industry—which relies on labels—is frustrating because that's not how I have sex in my [real] life and I know that that's not how a lot of my fans have sex.

But a lot of my fans will come to my work or things that they've seen me in because they specifically have a thing for BBW porn or they specifically have a thing for black women. If I produced porn, I would use that opportunity to include all these beautiful big black women. I like a wide range of women and I like a wide range of men, and I would want to see that in anything that I produce. I get exhausted with the fact that a lot of porn is the same thing—the same looks, the same formula, the same way of expressing sexuality.

MMY: Absolutely. How did you like working with Courtney Trouble and Shine Louise Houston in *Lesbian Curves* or the *Crashpad* series? And how do you compare working in indie and feminist/queer porn compared with the mainstream industry?

BB: It's completely different. I like working with Courtney and Shine because they treat their performers better. We have complete control over whatever we want to do. I'm not saying that other companies necessary treated me badly . . . When I work with indie companies and I want to use barriers or condoms, or I want to be comfortable or to shape the scene [I can do so]. I can have a say in how I am portrayed.

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I also felt really proud of the last thing that I shot for Courtney Trouble, not only because it is with somebody that I know and love [but also because] Courtney set the frame for how they wanted [the scene] to be done, what they wanted to get from us out of the scene. We communicated all along. I felt like I had agency and like I was really sexy in the scene. I also feel that I really stepped up as a performer. I was able to come out of my shell a little bit. Because sometimes, the mainstream stuff that I do, I just look like a deer in the headlights. [*Laughs*] [The] penis comes and it's just like everything. It's just not the same [sense of] empowerment. I love the co-stars that I work with [in mainstream productions]—that's not what I'm saying—it's just a different structure.

MMY: It seems like it would be in the interest of producers to be ethical and treat their talent well so that they get the best performances. But there is this industrial aspect in the mainstream industry that really does not treat most workers with care, except for the people that they see as most valuable. And everybody else seems to feel pretty disposable. Do you agree?

BB: Yes, definitely. BBWs don't even have agents. It's like we aren't seen as valuable at all. Being black and a BBW, I feel doubly disposable. You are pretty much dime a dozen because you're brown. I wish that indie companies had the money that mainstream companies have because then I would have more jobs.

MMY: Do indie companies pay the same or do they pay less than mainstream companies?

BB: They pay comparable rates. If you are doing a queer scene you're not going to be getting paid the same as if you're doing a straight scene. You'll probably get paid $200 or $300 [at the lower end of the mainstream market] and considering that [both indie companies I worked with] pay $300 a scene, that's pretty comparable.

MMY: How do you feel in your performances? Do you enjoy the boy-girl scenes as much as the girl-girl scenes?

BB: It really depends on the co-star. Some of my co-stars were super fun. I am queer and I enjoy relationships with both men and women, but I think that my attraction to men is a bit stronger. Technically speaking, sometimes the straight scenes are a bit easier because I'm lazy and it's less work. If I'm doing mainstream, they're not typically looking for me to top. They're not looking for me to take control of the scene and so I really just have to get into different angles and make noises. With the queer performances, more stuff has to happen.

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MMY: I read your writing on your blog about your experiences performing. It looks like it's supposed to be easy. But it's not, is it?

BB: It's definitely not easy! But I feel like I am becoming more confident as a performer and learning a little bit more about how not to make horrible faces at the camera.

It really is a shame to me how horrible the industry pays and how difficult it is for me to put myself out there as a viable performer. But my way of dealing with that is to create my own projects, because I don't really want to have my money filtered through a lot of other people. I don't really want to be seen through other people's lenses anymore. I want to have more control and agency and creativity. I don't want to have a generic porn-girl Web site; I want to have something out there that's creative and different and that has the same values that I have. I'm a highly political person; I'm very passionate, and I don't want to downplay that to be in mainstream porn.

MMY: When I started doing porn research there were no black women directing. It's fascinating to watch how with changes in technology there is a cadre of black women who matured in the industry and who were able to move behind the scenes. People like Vanessa Blue and Diana Devoe who became important directors, and Shine Louise Houston and Nenna Joiner coming into the picture. The first black woman to become a director was Angel Kelly who was the first black woman with a contract in the 1980s. What kind of porn would you like to make?

BB: Well, I work at an adult store and we have this whole spiel that we tell people when they're trying to buy porn. Specifically when it's guys trying to buy porn for their girlfriends and they have no idea what women like, it's always like, "Women like story lines," or "Women like feature films." Or [we show them] very weird versions of porn produced by women. It's [supposedly] more gentle, more romance novel-y, or erotica. And I don't like any of the shit! [*Laughs*] I don't identify [with it] at all.

So, I think that part of what I want to produce is hardcore. It might have a storyline—there are some cute campy things that I would like to do—but I think that [my porn] would dispel the idea that women like [story lines or romance-y erotica] in porn.

The other thing I'd include would definitely be diversity. I'm so tired of white women being *the thing*. I would have white women, but they wouldn't be the focus. There wouldn't be ten scenes with white women and then an Asian person thrown in for diversity. There wouldn't be one type of look that would be acceptable. I definitely want hot people but hot people from a variety of different subcultures and ethnicities.

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I want to play with the format. When some people masturbate or fantasize, they think about short images, like focusing on specific acts or on specific body parts. So, I want to play with that. I want to have images overlaying in scenes in a way where there's a lot of condensed erotic imagery. So that it's not just one scene that plays out from start to finish. When I look at trailers for porn I see all the hot stuff all at once and I get totally into it. I don't know why there can't be porn that's the length of a trailer where they just have the juicy bits all put together.

MMY: I love that idea because most people spend somewhere between six and ten minutes watching porn for masturbation, so films don't need to be that long. Let me ask you about kink and BDSM. It's one of your interests and I think that it's getting more attention these days but there's still, at least from an academic perspective, not a lot of research done on people of color and kink. I think that it's really interesting and complex because, given black women's history and the history of slavery, a lot of people from the outside see ropes and it's automatically associated with the history of violence used against us. We add a layer to our experience of fantasy that maybe other people don't have. I just wonder how you would describe your fascination with, or desire for, kinky sex.

BB: The shoots that I've done haven't really involved anything kinky. In the scene that I did with Kitty [Stryker], there was a little bit of butt slapping and spitting, but that's as kinky as it got. Most of my fans are not looking for that from me. I do have a photo shoot that has me in ropes and I actually had some conflict with my friends (and with myself) about what it means to be portrayed [tied up] in rope. It's a challenge for me because I really enjoy being in bondage. I like the sensation and I like that sort of play. But I feel this pressure from people of color to see more images of black dommes or black women in power, and they are rallying behind those images more than behind [images of] black submissives. This makes it so it's not okay to be submissive.

I'm not necessarily submissive or dominant, but I definitely feel like if I did a dominant shoot everybody would be excited about that. Maybe it would be different if I was shown being submissive to another black person [rather than to a white person], but other than that it's interesting; it's a challenge to figure out. I cam for *Kink.com* and everything is managed through them, [but] they don't have big girls on any of their main sites.

MMY: Tell me about camming. What is the exchange framework?

BB: Basically, with the exchange framework, users have the option of tipping in the public room or taking me private. I think it is $5.99 a minute. I get

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40 percent of any money made. I know some of the major companies stream [the cam sessions] and get 20 or 30 percent. There are smaller, more feminist companies, like Skin Video, where you make 80 percent, but they don't have the traffic that *Kink.com* or *Streamit.com* have.

There [has been] a lot of controversy, especially with feminists in the porn community, [over representation issues] at *Kink.com*. Ultimately it was important for me to be aligned with a major company [like *Kink.com*] and I wanted to increase their portrayal of [BBWs] because I was the only BBW model on their cam site initially. Now they have more, and that was important to me. I know that there is a huge BBW contingent in the kink community and especially in the local [San Francisco] kink community so it's interesting that our local kinky site doesn't really have that many BBWs on there.

MMY: Yes, *Kink.com* is known for being overwhelmingly white. Are you seeing a shift in that?

BB: I'm seeing a few more people of color. There's a lot more diversity among the cam models. I think that's because we are making our own money and [the company is] not having to invest as much. They're okay with making the cam models more diverse. But the shoots can still be pretty homogenous. I've only been in one of their shoots and that was as an extra.

MMY: What are the kinds of things that the webcam viewers or consumers write you when you're in chat?

BB: For the most part I spend a lot of time in public chat and I would say that a lot of fans just want to talk with me. One person regularly comes and picks me just because he likes to find out what's going on in my life. We talk about everything under the sun. Because I know a lot about sexual health and sex toys, I'll tell people about pegging or toys they can use with their partners. The majority of the audience is male and the guys don't normally feel safe or comfortable talking about [sex] and so they're behind their computer and they can hear this weird, quirky girl talk about pegging or whatever. That part I enjoy.

I also like that at the end of the day people are paying me to pleasure myself. A majority of what I do in private is just play with my Hitachi [Magic Wand] and that's it. Sometimes people will give me instructions, like, I'll have to spank myself, or whatever, but I'm in control. I can hit myself as hard as I want to. My skin gets red pretty easily so I'm really not using that much force.

MMY: It's interesting that you're doing sex education on webcam as well. In my research on black women performers on a token-based webcam site, it

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seemed to me that when compared to white women, black women were being asked to do so much more for the tokens, whereas a lot of the white women sex workers who were doing really well and were listed at the top of the list remained clothed. The white women were just chatting and typing, but the black women were going full throttle just to get a token, and it seemed that they were asked to do a lot more for less.

BB: I think that it really depends. Porn stars will [be treated differently] than non-porn performers doing cam work because we already have a fan base that's like, "Oh, right. I can cam and talk to you." When I first started camming my experience was a little different than it is at Kink. I'm definitely still not as desirable as some of the white women on the site, so I'm not going to paint it like it's always fun. There are times when I'll come home with two hundred bucks after three hours and there are times when I come home with twenty bucks or no bucks! I guess I don't know what I'm being asked to do compared to white women. Typically I'm not asked to do a lot of crazy things. I don't do shit that I don't want to do and I make that clear to people. I set boundaries around what I'm willing to do. Like in the public room, when I do things for tips, I'll say, "I'll do this and then you can tip this amount." That way, if they're into that act they'll tip and if they're not they won't. I won't be in a private and wanting to make money but being asked to do some shit that I don't want to do.

MMY: That gives you a sense of control?

BB: Yeah, I feel in control. A lot of what I've been doing lately is public shows where I'll just say, "If we get up to a hundred bucks then I will play with my Hitachi in public," and that way they all get to see and interact [with me] even if they can't afford a private. And I get to decide how much I want to do or what I want to do and that agreement is made ahead of time. Before I was doing it differently. I was really pushing for privates—and I still do privates—but I'm finding that if I raise money in public I get to do what I want and I'm guaranteed a certain amount of money. I just like that better. It also depends on what site you work for. Every site has a different structure. They have different rules.

Ultimately, guys will come to the room and if they are attracted to me they're going pick me for a private if they have the money. Most people just want to see me masturbate and that's it, or see me spank myself. It's very, very basic. There's a subset of people that want me to dominate them, but I don't that often and I'm not as good at it [as others]. Some people will pay me just to sit there in a ball gag or some people are just lonely and they'll pay me to chat.

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MMY: Do you feel like you can express yourself in this genre of sex work? Is there a creative aspect to it?

BB: There's definitely a creative aspect to it. I have control over everything—how I style myself, how I do my hair, how I dress myself, what I say, what I decide to talk about. I can sit with people and talk to them about *Star Trek* if I want to and there are guys who will totally jack-off to that.

When I first started [camming] there was this one period where it would get really slow in the room and I would just blow up a bunch of condoms and make balloon sculptures and then people would start tipping for that. I feel like when I just do something weird they're going to tip for that because they're like, "I've never seen anything like that on cam before." I definitely feel like it's fun.

MMY: Your master's degree in Creative Writing is from the University of Sydney and your undergraduate degree is from Mills College. Do you think your educational background gives you an advantage in the kind of work that you're doing?

BB: It gives me a disadvantage sometimes because it distances me from other people who think that I think that I'm better than them. Or it disappoints other people because they're like, "Why are you in porn if you're smart?" I don't think my education gives me any advantage in my work but it helps me articulate my oppression sometimes.

MMY: In your YouTube videos, you talk about Trayvon Martin, institutionalized racism, and mental health. You have profound things to say about your life and about the way that you see the world. And to me, although you might feel like your education does not give you an advantage, I think that it's given you the capacity to think through your life and experience and to put your voice out there in a way that does make a difference.

BB: It does make a difference a little bit. It gives people a little bit of an idea of what it means to be in this industry. I think it definitely gives people a different face for porn performers. I think that because I'm educated, I bring something to the table when I deal with fans and when I tell them about what it's like to be in this industry. I hope that [my education] will really serve as an advantage when I start producing my own stuff.

MMY: I want to ask you about your YouTube videos about mental health. It's really wonderful to hear mental health talked about because this is totally taboo and silenced in communities of color. The subject has also been totally silenced in terms of how it impacts us as sexual beings, as women of color who

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are sexual. How do you feel your mental health struggles shape your sexual identity or the practices that you are engaging in? How does it shape how you have to take care of yourself as a worker in the industry?

BB: I didn't see [my sexuality and mental health] as interlinked really until I realized that I probably was more promiscuous as a woman of color and as a fat woman because [sex] is a form of validation. I felt insecure or disempowered in the world or I felt depressed or sad and [sex] was just immediate gratification. I'm sure that it has to do with how my sexuality was shaped, but not all of it. I don't feel like when I do a shoot or anything like that it really affects my mental health. It's more the politics around porn, the industry, the money, and that kind of stuff that affects my mental health. That's where I don't feel supported or I feel anxiety and depression around those things. I think also there just isn't an understanding of mental health in general in the world, let alone what comes with being [porn] performers. People will just assume that mental issues are a factor in [my entering porn], "Well you're doing something that's taboo and [part of the] subculture, of course you're crazy."

MMY: Right. The misperception is that you have to have something wrong with you to be there in the first place. Actually the thing that makes something wrong mentally or emotionally for you is the politics of the industry in devaluing your labor. The bigger problem is the structural inequality that then creates this situation. I love that argument to counter antiporn feminists who assume that (a) you must have been abused, and therefore you must be living out this problematic traumatic childhood, and/or (b) that the abuse occurs in the way you are objectified by the representation, by the image itself, which then traumatizes other women.

BB: If I was valued the same as my white counterparts, and seen as beautiful and sexy, and if I was making the same amount of money, then not only would I not struggle with financial issues, but [I wouldn't struggle with] insecurity issues as well. Some people say that money doesn't buy happiness, but I definitely feel that's said by people who have money. That is not something that is said by poor people.

Of course you can't literally buy happiness, but you can definitely buy mental health medication and the resources that you need. With money, you can buy a lot of things that can get you pretty damn close to happiness.

NOTE

1. On the latter and the relationship between the two sides of the porn industry see Tristan Taormino et al., eds., *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013).

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